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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000408

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (GORKOWSKI)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/28/2019  
TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KG  
SUBJECT: KYRGYZ OPPOSITION MOSTLY UNITED BEHIND  
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

REF: A. 07 BISHKEK 350  
1B. 07 BISHKEK 1401

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Classified By: Ambassador Tatiana C. Gfoeller, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: An April 25 congress of the opposition United People's Movement (UPM) endorsed former Prime Minister and Social Democrat Party head Almaz Atambayev as its main candidate for the July 23 Presidential election. The congress also backed former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov's candidacy, an apparent effort to provide a fallback option if Atambayev's candidacy falters. The selection of Atambayev appears to place political pragmatism over principle, as some opposition members still recall Atambayev's previous role as Prime Minister under President Bakiyev in 2007. Meanwhile, the two largest parties in the UPM, Ata Meken and the Social Democrats, are holding talks on merging their parties, but this consolidation could alienate Ak Shumkar, the third largest opposition party within UPM. End Summary.

Atambayev's the One, but there is Another One

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12. (SBU) An April 25 the Congress of the opposition United People's Movement (UPM) officially endorsed former Prime Minister and Social Democrat Party (SDPK) head Almaz Atambayev and former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov as candidates for the July 23 Presidential election. Atambayev earlier had said that he wanted SDPK MP Bakyt Beshimov or Ata Meken leader Omurbek Tekebayev to receive the nomination, but he agreed to accept it when the UPM leadership chose him unanimously. Tekebayev previously told the press that Isakov, who had already nominated himself as a Presidential candidate, would be the UPM's backup candidate.

Atambayev's Recent History

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13. (C) Atambayev is a longtime participant in the revolving door of Kyrgyz politics. He ran for President against Askar Akayev in 2000, winning six percent of the vote, and was

initially a candidate in the 2005 Presidential election. However, he withdrew his candidacy after reportedly playing an instrumental role in shaping the agreement between Felix Kulov and then-interim President Kurmanbek Bakiyev that allowed for Bakiyev's election as President and Kulov's appointment as Prime Minister. However, Atambayev, who became Minister of Industry, became disillusioned, resigned, and joined the opposition in April 2006. In March 2007, with some in the opposition threatening to stage mass demonstrations against the government, Atambayev accepted Bakiyev's offer to become Prime Minister in an effort to bridge the gulf between the government and the opposition.

¶4. (C) At the time, many opposition leaders viewed Atambayev's acceptance of the appointment as a betrayal, and they refused his offer to bring some of them into government. In November 2007, nine months after his appointment and three days after registration closed for the December 2007 Parliamentary elections, Bakiyev fired him (Ref B).

¶5. (C) Although some opposition supporters may still dislike Atambayev for previously serving Bakiyev, others recognize that they missed an opportunity when Atambayev was Prime Minister. UPM leader Azimbek Beknazarov, a former MP and Prosecutor General, recently stated that the main reason that anti-government demonstrations in fall 2006 and spring 2007 had not produced lasting change was the opposition's failure to follow Atambayev into government.

Ata Meken and SDPK Coming Together?

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¶6. (SBU) Recent media accounts report that Ata Meken and

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the Social Democrats, the two largest opposition parties, are planning to merge. On April 24, Ata Meken member Joomart Saparbayev told the Embassy that party leaders have been discussing the merger for the past year, primarily so that their organizations can better coordinate during the Presidential campaign. However, he added, no final decisions have yet been reached.

¶7. (C) Bolot Alymkulov of Ak Shumkar, probably the third largest party in the UPM, told the Embassy in a separate April 24 conversation that the party merger, which he presented as a done deal, was an attempt by Ata Meken leader Tekebayev and SDPK leader Atambayev to band together against Ak Shumkar's leader Temir Sariyev. According to Alymkulov's analysis, Atambayev wants the established opposition credentials of Ata Meken behind him, while Tekebayev is hoping to leverage Atambayev's superior resources for the next Parliamentary elections. In past conversations, Alymkulov has made it clear that Sariyev, who is believed to be very wealthy, considers himself to be supporting the lion's share of the UPM's activities, and that he expects no less than the Prime Minister's post if the UPM candidate should be successful in the July Presidential election. Alymkulov said that Ak Shumkar will retain its independence, but he did not expand on Ak Shumkar's level of commitment to the UPM. Tellingly, Sariyev did not attend the April 25 UPM congress.

Comment

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¶8. (C) The selection of Atambayev as UPM's main candidate was somewhat surprising, given the reservations some had expressed about his "opposition credentials" following his earlier service in the Bakiyev administration. However, an October 2008 opinion poll did show Atambayev having higher approval ratings than any other politician currently in opposition. With the Bakiyev administration likely to continue its harassment of opposition figures, the UPM's backing of former Defense Minister Isakov as a "back-up" candidate is not surprising. Opposition leaders had earlier

told us that they would register more than one candidate, so  
that government resources could not be directed against a  
single opponent.

GFOELLER